

## Race and Ethnicity

### Issue Brief: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in the Latino American Community

#### **Key Words:**

Violence, AIDS, Family, Open, Safe- Sex, Community, Sexual Minority, Culture

#### **Description:**

This issue brief explains the Latino family's view on homosexuality, the life that the Latino homosexual lives in the Latino community, as well as the need for homosexuals in the Latin community to be sexually educated without ridicule or threat.

#### **Key Points:**

- The Latino family requires that the sexual lives, the sexual partners or lovers, and the homosexual friends be excluded from the social network of family membership
- Gays and lesbians of color face higher risks of physical and verbal assault
- Latino homosexuals don't feel apart of any community, but only feeling like a minority who is a sexual minority
- "Feeling abandoned" and "being kept in a box with no way out" has lead to sexual encounters that are not safe due to the priority of keeping sexuality a secret and disconnected from the public and family life.

#### **Issue Brief**

The acceptance of homosexuality is increasing more and more everyday.

However, today the Latino community is growing in the United States and is close to being the majority of the country's population in a couple of years. By 2010, the Latino population should be the majority and only grow in size in the years following, which should immensely start changing the political landscape of the country. Much of this increase of the Latino population is due to the large amount of legal and illegal immigrants who have entered the United States.

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The Latino community is also making momentous accomplishments economically and politically, like the 80% growth in the Latino middle class in the last 20 years<sup>1</sup> and Sonia Sotomayor's appointment to the Supreme Court. Amidst all of this, there haven't been many groundbreaking strides when it comes to the role that homosexuals play in the Latino community. This is due much in part to the Latino family structure that frowns upon homosexuality.

The Latino people view family as the foundation of Latino culture. They do this because of the economic and language barrier that many Latinos in the United States face. Many first generation immigrant families have had great difficulty assimilating into American culture and making ground economically. It can be said that it is already hard enough to be a person of color in the United States whose second language is English, let alone becoming a sexual minority as well by openly admitting that you are a homosexual. Many households find homosexuality to be nothing more than "a source of disruption and estrangement from the highly valued and potentially protective family support system." This has pushed homosexuality into the dark backgrounds of Latino culture where it is considered taboo in family life.

Along with becoming outcasts in the family of Latinos, many homosexuals have been the targets of physical and verbal assault. "Lesbians or Gay men of color were more likely than White respondents to report having been chased or followed, pelted with objects, or physically assaulted", (Herek, pg. 29). This violence ranges from schools and campuses, jails, to even the home. Lesbians of color were also found "more likely than

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<sup>1</sup> Hispania News: <http://www.hispanianews.com/archive/2001/March02/06.htm>

White lesbians to report having experienced physical violence, threats, vandalism, or rape.

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Unfortunately, the Latino homosexual has become the “black sheep” in the Latino community and has resorted to secret lives just to keep their families together and strong, as oppose to being put in exile from their loved ones. Some men have gone even so far as to have marriages with women and have children just so that their family name may carry on. Many of these men will secretly go to parks, truck stops, or public rest rooms to have sex with other men, typically with strangers and in strange hidden places”, (Levine, pg. 235). The desperation of these homosexuals to fulfill their sexual desires have in many occasions lead to unprotected sexual encounters.

It is because of the stigma that has been attached to being homosexual in the Latino community that has lead to many homosexuals engaging in life altering sexual activity. The biggest threat among Latino gay men being HIV, “as overlapping members of the two groups- Latinos and men who have sex with men- Latino gay/bisexual men in the United Sates have been highly and disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic”, (Levine, pg. 221). During 1990, the death rate per 100,000 from HIV-related causes was 22.2 for Latinos compared to 8.7 for Whites. In 1994, 17 percent of all diagnosed AIDS cases in the United States were Latino. This is a startling statistic when you take into account that the Latino population was only 9 percent of the population that year. As of June 1994, 65 percent of all males diagnosed AIDS cases in the United States had been among men who have sex with men.<sup>2</sup> There has been an obvious need for awareness in the Latino community, specifically among gay men, about the dangers of HIV/AIDS, which has had crippling effects.

There is opportunity to eliminate the negative effects that HIV/AIDS has had on the Latino community. This would require the sexual activity of gay men to be put in the forefront of Latino life and become a subject of open discussion. Once this is done, the Latino homosexual community will be even more prepared to save many lives through sexual education. It is necessary to have “safe place” for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals to speak openly and learn more about the risks and necessary precautions that must be taken while engaging in sexual activity. Most importantly, this safe place must protect the individual from ridicule and threat, so that the individual may feel comfortable enough to learn, ask questions, and voice concern.

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<sup>2</sup> Levine. In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbian Encounters HIV/AIDS. University of Chicago Press. 1997.

There have been signs that show that small progress is being made in the Latino community on topics of homosexuality. A recent sign is from the state of California's amendment of constitutionally banning gay marriage. "The proposition was trailing among white voters, but was ahead among black voters. Latino voters were closely divided", (LA Times). From this we can see that there are still disputes on the issue but there is indeed more room in the Latino community for one to support the gay community in the public arena, something that was thought of as unthinkable not too many years ago. The fact that the Latino community's voters didn't overwhelmingly support the amendment and there was a solid support base adamantly against the amendment shows the progress, but there is still much ground from the Latino community before the LGBT Latino Community has a real "voice" in the United States' political arena.

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